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Sewer project puts community's health at risk, needs to be stopped

By Annetta Coffman Jul 15, 2018

Many wonder why the Minden sewer project is so controversial. PCB's were banned in 1977 because they presented an intolerable threat to the health and safety of the public. It is immoral that Minden residents are still dealing with the impacts of the banned chemical dumped decades ago. It is just plain stupid to consider, in 2018, increasing a risk that Minden shouldn't have to deal with in the first place. It is infuriating that the EPA and WVDEP have proven themselves incapable of using precaution, choosing not to hide their cowardice or disregard for the lives of Minden residents.

The salt storage area behind Collins Park has been a favorite spot to dump Minden dirt from the sewer project. Children use this park nearly daily as a community resource for athletic programs, picnics and playground. If high levels of PCBs are in the soil that was dumped at the park, then a public project, funded by state and federal grants and loans, would have created a Superfund site in a heavily used park. This would wipe a community resource off the map, and extend the risks associated with PCBs to another community. No documentation has been required by EPA and WVDEP regarding transportation and disposal of Minden soil.

The construction crew for the sewer project hit an underground tank during construction. The tank cracked open and the equipment operator's face went numb. Nearby residents experienced respiratory problems. It seems like common sense that when a whole community tells you there are dangerous chemicals buried everywhere, you should make sure to have an underground survey done to avoid accidentally digging up something dangerous.

Lois Marie Gibbs, an American environmental activist and primary organizer of the Love Canal Homeowners Association, visited Minden last November and said this: "It is absolutely insane to think about putting a sewer line through this area, disrupting the soil,

and providing a conduit (I don't care how they backfill it) for chemicals to continue to travel from Minden to other places throughout the area. It should be illegal, someone ought to go to jail if they put one of those pipes in."

As of now, the Minden sewer project has interfered with environmental investigations in at least one notable location. The consequences of these events is that if more contamination is present under the pipes, liner, and gravel, then it will be extremely difficult to conduct sampling in that location. As construction continues, we anticipate that these types of conflicts with construction, investigations and timing will likely continue to become more complicated.

As the pipes and construction equipment for the sewer project arrived in Minden, very large vehicles trod on and off the muddy property where 1.2 ppm PCB's were found in the soil, above EPA screening levels. Their tires left ruts in the lot and the mud was all over the vehicles. However, these vehicles moved freely off the contaminated property into the roadway and wherever the next destination was, leaving a trail of mud in the road.

WVDEP and the EPA used soil quality information to make their statements about the safety of the project. They lacked the foresight required to predict that there would be a dust plume created by disturbing the soil. In addition to the potential for PCB's in the dust, there is also potential for raw sewage. These are two things that should not be inhaled.

That's why in these hot, sunny, dusty days, windows stay shut and children stay inside.

WVDEP did not follow up on air quality complaints made until many days later.

Currently, the Minden sewer project is permitted and regulated in the same exact way a sewer project would be permitted and regulated in a location that is not contaminated.

Protecting the public from PCBs during sewer upgrade construction is not mandatory. In fact, addressing the threat of PCB contamination is not even mentioned in any of the permit documents.

It's a crying shame that it has been up to residents to detect, document, report problems – not any of these agencies. According to what we have seen so far, our environmental agencies barely and exclusively have the ability to react to problems that this project brings. These agencies do not have the ability or courage to prevent problems from happening. This is as dangerous as the PCBs.

When permitting and regulating this project, the WVDEP and EPA assume that Minden is PCB free until convinced otherwise. According to documents that they have and the eye witness reports from community members, they should be assuming that all of Minden is contaminated until proven otherwise. Instead of the constant WVDEP supervision promised to us for the sewer project in public meetings, we have only cops guarding the construction.

Despite all of these problems with the project so far, The Oak Hill Sanitary Board, the Oak Hill city manager and Thrasher Engineering are forcing the project along. There have been massive unforeseen PCB-related costs associated with construction already, which will

likely be distributed to rate payers. As this project is being violently pushed forward, Oak Hill rate payers are covering the costs of putting a neighboring community at risk. Every step of this sewer project has felt like a direct attack on Minden lives. We need the help of surrounding communities to push governor Jim Justice to stop the toxic sewer project like he did before, until Minden residents are relocated. Annetta Coffman is a Minden resident and member of Headwaters Defense, an environmental and health justice organization located in Fayette County.